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British Fiction at the Seaside

Across the nineteenth and into the first decades of the twentieth century, genre fiction developed that could incorporate and capitalise on shared assumptions about the behaviour of seaside visitors in the context of the holiday resort. For instance, the Regency Brighton later represented in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) is suggestive of freedoms that transmute into the shabby sexual convenience of Evelyn Waugh's inter-war *A Handful of Dust* (1934) whose characters stage rather than perform immoral acts in order to facilitate divorce proceedings, and the brutal disillusionment of Graham Green's *Brighton Rock* (1936).

Freedom and Constraint – The Lure of Promiscuous Mixing

These parallels should surprise us less than they do given that from their eighteenth-century beginnings and throughout the nineteenth century the appeal of the coastal resorts was based on a nexus of contradictions. The restorative properties of the sea air and sea bathing meant that they were well-adapted to an invalid clientele, but inadequate chaperonage and the regular absence of husbands (many of whom were obliged to spend at least part of each week at work elsewhere) suggested at least the possibility of illicit encounters. The penumbra of 'the illicit' provided an unspoken context for even seemingly innocent events, as when in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) the honourable Captain Wentworth feels obliged to propose to the frivolous Louisa Musgrove after she injures herself performing an ill-advised jump off the Cobb steps in Lyme Regis. While there is no suggestion of impropriety, his half-hearted attentions are more visible and more dangerous by the sea whilst the young lady is away from her parents. The suspension of social boundaries was both liberating and exciting for many, but equally it exposed the naïve visitor to the attentions of sharpers. In 1835 Dickens was appealing to a knowing audience in "The Tuggses at Ramsgate", a story about a family who unexpectedly come in to money and begin their social rise with a seaside holiday. Twentieth-century representations of the seaside and the multiplicity of social identities it enables are imbued with these earlier traditions.

Similar assumptions about the nature of particular resorts tend to be shared across a range of poetic and fictional modes through and beyond the nineteenth century, from the Victorian comic lay (largely forgettable) to the twentieth-century detective novel. Both of these were pitched in their own time as particularly suitable holiday reading, as was of course the three-volume sensation novel in its 1860s heyday. While each of these genres is distinct and in some ways very different, each tends to focus on the resort from the visitor's perspective, as an interlude rather than a familiar local setting.

Slumming

The comic sketch and the popular lay may satirise the figure of the tourist, the seaside landlady or both; in sensation fiction on the contrary, the out-of-season resort is depicted as faded but also dangerous, as if unaccountably divorced from its proper function. By the twentieth century, fiction set at the height of the season provided an advertisement for the attractions of the resort as well as a crowded backdrop against which murder could be committed, an ironic reminder of the time when it was "dangerous" to move freely among strangers on the beach.

Even local authors and character narrators in the realist mode could find it difficult to eschew the trope of the holiday altogether. In *David Copperfield* the eponymous narrator is treated as an honorary Yarmouth resident through his relationship with the Peggotty family. But in this context his most important textual act is to register the disruption caused by the upper-class visitor Steerforth's indulgence in what would come to be called "slumming". The mordant treatment of Ernest Pontifex's youth in Samuel Butler's posthumous novel *The Way of All Flesh* (written between 1873 and 1884 but not published until 1903), and Somerset Maugham's similarly autobiographical *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and *Cakes and Ale* (1930), reference the idea of the visitor as outsider. Tellingly these retrospective accounts of a late-Victorian response to the seaside (Dover and Whitstable respectively) depend on the assumptions made by – or about – visitors, as a means of satirizing what they see as the stifling restrictions of the time.

In Maugham's Blackstable (Whitstable) a new resident, who turns out to be a writer and will ultimately make the town famous, is met with suspicion because the

narrator takes him for a tourist and "in Blackstable we did not mix with the summer visitors. We thought London people vulgar" (36). In *The Way of All Flesh* it is left to the ghastly Charlotte to invite Pontifex down to an idealised Dover where "The top of the cliffs will soon be bright with heather" and "the cliffs are always beautiful". His response is immediate and decisive. "When I have a bad nightmare," said Ernest to me, laughing as he showed me this letter, "I dream that I have got to stay with Charlotte" (425-6).

Notwithstanding this excoriating comment, the seaside holiday was a staple of British culture at the time and the coastal resorts, many of them former fishing villages, were in direct competition for the summer holiday market. A stretch of only a few miles along the East Kent coast was home to some of the most famous, including Broadstairs (popularised by Dickens) and Ramsgate. The changing fortunes of these resorts are exemplified by the decline in cultural capital during the nineteenth century of the once desirable Margate and (Royal) Ramsgate, where Queen Victoria had stayed as a girl. By the 1840s Ramsgate was associated with bothersome "old maids" and second-rate parties from London, and both towns came to be associated with day-trippers and worse vulgarities following the expansion of the railway network from around the same time.

Despite their proximity these towns each established a particular identity and held a different status – notably the upper-class Birchington sought to distance itself from the decidedly more raffish Margate, its immediate neighbour. In the 1892 *Diary of a Nobody* the bank clerk Charles Pooter chooses the respectable Broadstairs for his annual family holiday, while his more adventurous friends plump for Margate, where (to Pooter's intense disgust) they play flirtatious games that he considers altogether unsuitable for his wife.

A few years later in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) Henry James offers a picture of Folkestone as the temporary refuge of an adulterous couple, but ensures that the town will be read as more boring than disreputable through the half-hearted interchanges of the protagonists. By 1905 H. G. Wells was denying even this faintly titillating quality, portraying Folkestone as priggish and lower middle class through the toe-curling social advance of the eponymous character in *Kipps*. When his

mentor Coote advises him that "You ought to make a rule, Kipps, and read one Serious Book a week. Of course, we can Learn even from novels, Nace [sic – implying a Cockney accent] Novels that is, but is isn't the same thing as serious reading" (131), we are meant to know into what kind of company we have strayed. Kipps is finally thrown over by his friend not for actual sexual misconduct but for jilting his middle-class fiancée and marrying a working class girl from his childhood instead.

Inevitably the Kent resorts were also compared in literature of the time with their more affluent rivals across the Sussex border; not always favourably, as James's depiction obliquely suggests. While the self-styled "Fashionable Folkestone" had an obvious advantage in terms of alliteration if nothing else, in the course of the nineteenth century other southern resorts such as Eastbourne and Brighton attained rather greater prestige. In Trollope's *Ralph the Heir* (1871) the feckless Ralph demonstrates his moral decline when he agrees to go on holiday with the family of his rich tailor, who has a marriageable daughter and to whom he owes money. She immediately exposes him by pointing out that he is on the wrong beach, "The idea of your being at Margate, Mr Newton", rather than in Brighton or vaguely defined "French places". When he declares that Margate seems very jolly she rejoins, "Oh, I like it. But then we are not swells, you know" (284).

But to be on the right holiday or even staying at the right hotel is not sufficient in itself to render the visitor above suspicion. With exquisite snobbery, Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler's 1899 *A Double Thread* positions her upper-class heroine as a casual bystander on holiday in Eastbourne, where the brash Cottle family go in determined search of social advancement, "To Mrs Cottle a yearly visit to the seaside was what a London season is to matrons of a higher growth; that is to say, it was a dive into the vortex of society, in search of a pearl in the shape of a desirable son-in-law" (143).

During the period of their fashionable and popular success, the resorts were well-suited to holiday and genre fiction as well as largely ephemeral poetry. Most

obviously the seaside was able to bear the weight of almost any degree of humour, however dubious the tone and perhaps the quality. Comic depictions of the seaside landlady are almost a cliché before they have begun in nineteenth-century sketches and poetry, reaching their apogee in the exploits of Arthur Sketchley's cockney Mrs Brown in the 1860s and '70s, as she rampages along the coast refusing to be beaten by unscrupulous lodging-house keepers in Margate and the neighbouring towns. In Pooter's Broadstairs by contrast "The landlady had a nice five o'clock dinner and tea ready, which we all enjoyed, although Lupin seemed fastidious because there happened to be a fly in the butter" (*The Diary of a Nobody* 42).

Presumably motivated by one joke too many of this ilk, an exasperated Folkestone resident felt moved to write to her own local journal at the end of the 1891 season, suggesting that the "funny man of the comic press" might like to turn his attention for once to the supposed victims and their children. She gives as an example the child who first cut the leg off a chair and having been reprimanded, felt justified in dismantling the clock on the grounds that it was not a chair; this is followed by the experience of a fellow landlady and friend whose guests refused to compensate her for the damage to her carpet after their child spent a happy morning cutting man-shaped figures out of it.

Jokes about the quality of lodgings would have been familiar to nineteenth-century readers, as would insinuations about the suspension of moral codes in which landladies might or might not be assumed to be complicit. Capturing the popular mood in 1823, the supposed diary of "a cockney" describes travelling down to Margate by the new steam-boat. Feeling "glad to escape from the counter, and leave my wife and all my cares behind me" the writer starts a flirtation with a family of six daughters on the boat, only to realise to his horror that the mother is his fishmonger's wife ("A week's journal at Margate" 373).

At mid-century both Dickens in "The Tuggses at Ramsgate" (1836) and Thackeray in *A Shabby Genteel Story* (1840) treat illicit sexuality between different classes as largely comic in the context of the resorts. Indeed it is apparently only the reader of the latter who is left feeling uncomfortable, as the narrator blithely describes Caroline's moral rejection of a proposed seduction only to leave her in a worse position, far from home and wrongly believing herself to be legally married. The

Tuggs family get off lightly by comparison, simply needing to pay off the supposedly outraged husband of the woman who has compromised their son. At around the same time the comic poem "Misadventures at Margate" from the *Ingoldsby Legends*, written by local author Richard Barham and published in volume form in the 1840s, eschews this type of vulgarity and hinges instead on the misplaced trust of a visitor who is taken in by a "vulgar boy" who then robs him of his spoons. But at the end of the century the seaside lays of Aliph Cheem were still working the time-honoured lines about flirtatious young women and what they got up to having eluded their fathers or, possibly, husbands. In 1892 *The Diary of a Nobody* takes Pooter to Broadstairs largely to ridicule his behaviour in a different location, but his anxiety about his son Lupin's behaviour while they are there has its roots in this longstanding and still active tradition.

Conscious Class-Consciousness

Disreputable goings on were not only an abundant source of humour. From the 1860s, with the rise of sensation fiction and the railway novel, the seaside resort became a prism for exploring anxieties about sexuality and social class in new ways. In Wilkie Collins's 1862 *No Name* the dispossessed Magdalen Vanstone attempts to recover her inheritance (lost when her parents are able to marry and fail to realise that this invalidates their most recent will), by marrying her rebarbative cousin Noel. Having tracked him to the Suffolk resort of Aldeburgh, she disguises herself and orchestrates a meeting on the pier. This initial encounter is made all the easier because the resort is virtually empty out of season and visitors are easily persuaded to improve their acquaintance more rapidly than even the holiday setting might normally allow. Crucially the formal introduction is made by Magdalen's supposed uncle, her accomplice Captain Wragge, who has himself made an excuse to draw Noel Vanstone into conversation before Magdalen's arrival. The arrival of the "Bygraves" family is noted in the *Suffolk Argus* and serves as a sort of background check, a device that undermines the credibility of social conventions in determining the character of new acquaintances.

In Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, published in the same year, the out-

of-season resort becomes a clue that must be decoded by an outsider, as Robert Audley relentlessly pursues the hidden identities of his uncle's mysterious but upwardly mobile wife through visits of detection to Withernsea in Yorkshire and Ventnor on the Isle of Wight. Lady Audley's pretence starts to unravel when Robert finds evidence that the supposedly dead Helen Talboys has simply disappeared from view, paying an undiscerning landlady to take in a genuinely dying substitute who will be buried in her name. The plot of both novels is mediated through the reader's fascinated suspicion as reckless female adventurers transgress boundaries in order to further their own ends, with the seaside resort as a key motif.

Crime Fiction

By the early twentieth century writers were starting to exploit readers' interest in crime as holiday reading to set murder mysteries in the resorts themselves, replacing the tourist with the detective as the necessary outsider figure. Burford Delannoy, writing in 1902, provides *The Margate Murder Mystery* with an instantly recognisable locale complete with Sanger's Hall-by-the-Sea, a dance and concert hall. Like its precursors in the sensation genre the novel takes the detective to the resort after the season has ended, but quickly moves the action back to London and on to Paris before resolving the mystery in Bexhill in Sussex.

Later crime writers such as Milward Kennedy make more substantial use of the resort to let readers move around the scene picking up clues. *Death in a Deck-Chair*, published in 1930, titillates its readers firstly by insisting that it is a fictional account of a real crime, and secondly by navigating the attractions of a thinly disguised contemporary Margate at the height of the summer season. Distinctions between different groups of visitors are satirically but closely set out:

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you must not confuse Prince's Bay with Prince's Beach. There is all the social difference in the world between them. For Prince's Bay is that part of the shore which nestles close to the tall cliffs, and on top of the cliffs are the well-to-do hotels and gardens where trippers find no encouragement – and little entertainment. Prince's Beach on the other hand is backed not by cliffs but by

what virtually is the main street: you can lounge on the pavement and listen to a variety of Concert Parties, and cross the road to dance in Wonderland (12).

</BLOCKQUOTE>

The narrator offers a direct challenge to readers in this location by suggesting that the classes are united in their enjoyment of murder as spectacle:

<BLOCKQUOTE>

the carrying from the sea to the esplanade of the dead body of an unknown man, clad in a bathing-dress and lying in a deck-chair soaked in what presumably was his own blood, combined the effect of a Punch and Judy show and a wedding at St Margaret's, Westminster (18).

</BLOCKQUOTE>

Having grounded themselves, readers – including presumably tourists of whatever class – are invited to work out how the murder was committed, and by what type of criminal, by observing the behaviour of a range of familiar figures from swimmers to beach photographers. The text is careful to include a range of workers such as “the attendants and the chair-men and all the rest for whom the search for pleasure meant hard work” (16). That the culprit ultimately turns out to be a local of the upper-middle class disguised as a seasonal worker stands as a reminder that in the crowded world of the resort, no identity is entirely stable.

In a twist on the theme in 1935, John Bude's *The Cornish Coast Murder* sees the local vicar indulging in what initially seems to be an illicit pleasure, represented by the arrival of a mysterious parcel: “With a leisurely hand, as if wishing to prolong the pleasures of anticipation, the Vicar cut the string with which the crate was tied and prised up the lid” (15). It turns out that they are actually crime stories borrowed from the library, “nestling deep in a padding of brown paper were two neat piles of vividly coloured books. One by one the Vicar drew them out, inspected the titles, made a comment and placed the books on the table beside his chair” (15). He is cured of the habit when a local writer is wrongly accused of murder, after which “I

feel that I never want to read another crime story as long as I live" (285). The summer tourist may be presented as seeking the thrill of a gruesome spectacle in Kennedy's novel; meanwhile the real-life reader of the text is encouraged to enjoy the vicarious pleasure of solving the crime in the location where the story is set. But a resident of the isolated landscape of Bude's novel may well feel that murder in the village a few miles from where he lives is just a bit too close to home.

Smugglers and Pirates

The murder mystery novel is not the only sub-genre to display a fascination with seaside crime. Parts of the coast have a historic association with smuggling, a tradition that would ironically become something of a nostalgic theme in popular literature by the twentieth century. An early example is Catherine Crowe's 1847 *The Story of Lilly Dawson*, in which a juvenile heiress is kidnapped by the pirates who have murdered her grandfather and is brought up as their cousin (and effectually servant) in a "lonely inn on the coast of Sussex" on "a wild stretch of common, thinly populated" (117). Nearly a century later Daphne du Maurier's 1936 novel *Jamaica Inn* riffs on the idea that smuggling can be successfully packaged for the tourist industry as a form of heritage. The novel itself is less than romantic in its treatment of the brutal smuggler and murderer Joss Yellan. But this may surprise readers of the prefatory note, who have been invited to imagine – or possibly even visit – a "hospitable and kindly" temperance house "as it might have been over a hundred years ago".

Russell Thorndike's Dr Syn stories, comprising seven volumes written between 1915 and 1944, make no apology for the appeal of the eponymous hero, a former Oxford don who becomes a pirate while chasing his adulterous wife around the world, before settling down as a vicar and smuggler on Romney Marsh. In fact the first volume ends with the death at the hands of a vengeful ghost of the resourceful but unscrupulous Dr Syn, but he proved so popular with readers that six prequels appeared in which he figures as a misunderstood and largely likeable character in the tradition of Robin Hood. Interestingly Syn's exploits and his mysterious fate were first published during World War I, in the same year as John Buchan's *The 39 Steps* with its dramatic interception of a German yacht carrying stolen British secrets off

the coast of Broadstairs. The character of Syn was revived in 1935, continuing to provide a model of daring and essential decency for most of World War II. It is the trope of smuggling that enables Syn's embodiment of qualities necessary to the patriotic ideal of the 1930s, such as loyalty, leadership and a strong identification with the local landscape.

Romance

The other twentieth-century genre most often associated with the seaside is of course the holiday romance, albeit among the earliest examples of this genre is Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817). And just as du Maurier subtly probes her contemporaries' fascination with smuggling, inviting them to take tea in a temperance hotel while imagining depraved and lawless behaviour along the rugged coastline, so writers of romantic fiction were quite capable of mocking their own approach.

Gabrielle Wodnil's *Maggie of Margate*, published in 1912, is the story of a harmless but vain *nouveau riche* young man, Mike Bhaer, who flirts and falls in love with the maid of the holiday house where he is staying with his married sister. Explaining to Maggie that he is not of her class and therefore cannot marry her, he at least tries to protect her from being exploited by his theatrical friend who wants to produce a play called *Maggie of Margate*. At the end of the novel it transpires that the supposed maid is in fact the same Lady Margaret Taunton Mike's sister has failed, despite all her machinations, to meet socially. She has been posing as a member of the working class as a form of amusement, and ruefully tells her lover that despite their mutual attraction, they are indeed from different social classes and so unable to marry. Her aunt – who has spent an uncomfortable summer as a supposedly provincial landlady – remarks at the end of the novel that "We should never have seen or known so much of such curious creatures by casual introductions at a club or an hotel. He is so natural, so unpolished – a prehistoric native in patent boots and the new century – a curio for the modern self-culture museum" (255).

Pamela Wynne's *Love in a Mist*, published in 1932 and concerned with the impact of post-war trauma on a young couple living in Margate, takes the theme of dangerous love considerably more seriously. Pauline Russell spends her time ministering to her

self-obsessed husband, who has been invalided during his time at the Front. Trapped by an enduring sense of guilt, she finds it impossible to resist his increasing dependency and demands on her time. She in turn develops a rather subservient relationship with a visitor (subsequently their lodger), a writer who has also suffered a mental breakdown as a result of the war. Wynne makes full use of the topography to heighten the romantic tension, letting readers track the characters across favourite seaside walks or through daily routines, as they meet or hope to meet in the town or in the bay. This strategy is considerably more effective for readers in the actual location where the main action takes place. But the climactic scene where the lovers are trapped by the incoming tide and almost drowned is transferrable across the key seaside genres, working equally well in both crime and romance fiction; crucially such dramatic moments can also be imaginatively applied to almost any coastline. The trope of drowning is also vital to du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), which hinges on the mysterious death of the first Mrs de Winter during a moonlight sail in Cornwall, as mediated through the response of her successor, a naïve young woman from a slightly lower social class. It is worth remembering in this context that what du Maurier does is not new; on the contrary she asks readers to look again at a trope so familiar that its significance is likely to be overlooked.

In the same year Elizabeth Bowen also uses the sea to position a young girl who is alienated from her own family and struggling to find a role for herself in the household she has joined. Portia Quayne's experience of love is more mundane than Pauline's and she faces no real danger, despite the motherly concern of the family friend, her sister in law's former governess, who takes her in. During a summer spent in Hythe (Seale in the novel), close to the Romney Marsh of Russell Thorndike, Portia's encounter with a charming scapegrace stops short of the traditional seduction and in a final anti-climax she simply returns to her brother's London house with a heightened awareness of his and his wife's indifference. Notably though she is "all different lately, since Seale" (311). A romanticised smuggling past and the suggestion of illicit sexuality both provide a hint of risk to fiction set in Kent, whether the genre is Crime or Romance.

Across the border in Sussex, Brighton has a special status based on a still more complex interplay of health, fashion and sexual misdemeanour. Known in the

nineteenth century as “Dr Brighton” for its healing atmosphere, the town was also associated from its foundation in Regency decadence with the unconventional behaviour depicted in Thackeray’s *A Shabby Genteel Story* (unfinished, 1857) and *Vanity Fair* (1848). In the last years of the century Bracebridge Hemyng was pedalling cheap fiction that is so bad it is hard to put down, with titles like *The Season at Brighton* (1872) and *A Brighton Mystery, or the Disappearance of Captain Jarvice* (1894). Both of these position a reader who looks up with fascinated wonder to the upper-class characters whose bad behaviour form the mainstay of the plot, while deriving equal enjoyment from the inferiority of the working class (whose main function is to be murdered at the rate of two or three per chapter).

By 1934 Brighton had become the divorce capital so disturbingly realised in Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*. In the Brighton scenes the manufacturing of “evidence” of adultery is banal rather than titillating; indeed the upper-class husband is able to backtrack when his wife tries to force him into selling his beloved house, because his hired co-respondent has insisted on bringing her young daughter to the hotel. In other words this interlude engages the long tradition of seaside licence only to undermine it. This ironic treatment of sexual immorality provides an unlikely point of reference with Graham Green’s *Brighton Rock*, published just four years later in 1938.

The picture of Brighton offered by Greene is underpinned by gang culture, but curiously this includes a rejection of promiscuous sexuality by the anti-hero Pinkie. Gang member Cubitt however spends his last penny on a slot machine to get a “love letter” that might have come straight out of Bracebridge Hemyng:

<BLOCKQUOTE>

“So you have discarded me for the Squire’s son...”

Cubitt grinned uneasily. He was deeply moved. That was what always happened if you took up with anything but a buer; they gave you the air.

Grand Renunciations, Tragedies, Beauty moved in Cubitt’s brain. If it was a buer of course you took a razor to her, carved her face, but this love printed here was class. He read on; it was literature: it was the way he’d like to write himself. (172)

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Unlikely as it seems, the gang warfare of mid-twentieth century Brighton has come full circle. Where writers such as Butler and Maugham consciously reject their nineteenth-century heritage, and a younger writer like Waugh subtly undermines it, Greene suggests that his dispossessed working class protagonists remain deeply, even uncritically dependent on a Victorian tradition of seaside fiction.

This tradition would be tested to its limits with the development of neo-Victorian fiction, most famously in John Fowles's 1969 *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. The opening paragraphs undermine the authority of written texts in their representation of history, setting the local view of the Cobb in Lyme Regis, 'a long claw of old grey wall that flexes itself against the sea' (3) against its heritage status, 'as the guide-books say, redolent of seven hundred years of English history' (4). Throughout A. S. Byatt's *Possession* the academics Roland and Maude struggle with the elusiveness of the past, but fail to move beyond it – even their 'day off' in Whitby is unknowingly spent in a place (Boggle Hole) that the subjects of their research had visited before them. While both novels question readers' responses to a culturally constructed past, they share a recognisably Victorian habit in their portrayal of sexual transgression as both coded and precipitated by the seaside interlude.

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